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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000832
SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/MAG AND IO/UNP
TRIPOLI AND TUNIS FOR SECRETARY'S PARTY AND NEA A/S WELCH
E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/04/2018

TAGS: OVIP PREL PBTS UNSC AG WI MO

SUBJECT: MOROCCO FURIOUS WITH UN ON VAN WALSUM REMOVAL,
STALLS ON REPLACEMENT AND SEEKS SRSG'S HEAD

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Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Moroccan Foreign Ministry Chief of Staff Nasser Bourita told PolCouns September 4 the GOM was deeply unhappy with the UN and its "bad faith" in ending the UNSYG Personal Envoy for Western Sahara Peter Van Walsum's mandate, and had conveyed this in a letter to the SYG. Bourita felt the Manhasset process was damaged by the UN allowing the Polisario to force Van Walsum out, a view reflected in local press. Bourita said the GOM did not want to re-engage without assurances on preserving the "progress" Van Walsum made, particularly his conclusion that independence is "unrealistic." It also seeks clarification of next steps in the talks before it could accept a new Personal Envoy. The Moroccans appreciated the qualities of nominee Chris Ross but may view his multiple tours in Algiers with suspicion. The GOM letter to the SYG also conveyed a demand for the removal of MINURSO head SRSG Julian Harston, including for internal messages suggesting a human rights monitoring role for MINURSO. These tactical issues will invariably come up in the Secretary's discussions in Rabat. We should urge that the GOM to move beyond the Van Walsum transition, while stressing the importance of keeping Manhasset on track -- even given its poor near-term prospects, and focus on how it can entice both the Algerians and Polisario to consider autonomy. End Summary.

"Serenity, Responsibility and Firmness"

¶2. (U) Moroccan media reported September 4 that the Kingdom, via Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri, had addressed a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon protesting Van Walsum's departure. Press accounts focused on the SYG's and the UN Security Council's praise of Van Walsum's contribution, subsequent to his telling the UNSC that independence for the Western Sahara was unrealistic. The letter regretted what it called an Algerian-orchestrated campaign to discredit Van Walsum. Morocco would, however, continue to support the pursuit of negotiations with "Serenity, Responsibility and Firmness." The MFA issued a communique that maintained that the UNSC had called for intense and substantive negotiations on its basis. The statement indicated this mandate should govern future rounds of negotiations towards an agreement, which would be based "on autonomy and nothing but autonomy."

¶3. (C) Nasser Bourita, the Foreign Minister's Chief of Staff (and Sahara negotiations working lead), called in PolCouns September 4 to explain that the letter took a tough approach toward the UN and conveyed the GOM's displeasure at the way Van Walsum and its own "sincere" approach were treated. Bourita underscored that the last UNSC resolution, approved at the end of April, praised Van Walsum following his Council briefing -- including his assertion that independence was unrealistic. The UN had then noted publicly the coherence of SYG views with those of Van Walsum. Since that time Morocco has pushed for a fifth round of talks. Those points were made in late July in New York directly to Ban Ki Moon by Foreign Minister Fassi Fihri and DGED Director General Mohammed Yassine Mansouri. They passed the SYG a letter from King Mohammed VI expressing support for Van Walsum,

recognizing the advances in the UNSCR and debates, and calling for another round. Barely a week later, the SYG responded in a letter to the King saying he would consider the GOM's points.

¶4. (C) Bourita said the GOM then heard nothing until late August, when PermRep Sahel sought clarification from Ban Ki Moon on Van Walsum's article about his departure. UN U/S Lynn Pascoe, then "informed" him that Chris Ross was the UN's choice to replace Van Walsum. Bourita noted that there had been no consultation either on ending Van Walsum's tenure or on possible replacements. The GOM viewed being presented with a "fait accompli," in the face of its own efforts to directly engage the UN, as "lacking respect." Even the King was upset, Bourita said. Moreover, removing Van Walsum in response to public Polisario objections had set a bad precedent, and not just for the Western Sahara, for any UN mission. If any mediator can be ousted when a party finds fault with him, mediation is doomed, he said.

¶5. (C) Bourita confirmed that Fassi Fihri had written the SYG September 1, to express his disappointment with the UN's actions and deep concern about the process. Morocco worried that the "progress" obtained by Van Walsum and the Security Council would be rolled back following his ouster. While RABAT 00000832 002.2 OF 003

there had been no advances in the talks with the Polisario, there had been progress in the Security Council resolutions focusing on a political settlement. He again recalled the UNSCR's call for "realism" and its endorsement of Van Walsum, which came only after hearing his conclusions, and the subsequent SYG expressions of support for Van Walsum and his positions. Bourita recalled that the autonomy plan was not Morocco's alone; it had been elaborated with the "Friends." Bourita hoped the "Friends" would now engage with the UN to maintain momentum. Morocco's own reengagement on the process would be contingent on preserving the "progress" made by Van Walsum. The GOM also sought clarification of the objectives and modalities of the contemplated fifth round. Only then would the GOM seriously consider a replacement for Van Walsum, he said.

Getting Personal

¶6. (C) Bourita said the GOM was aware of Ross's sterling record and that he personally had been impressed when they had met Ross on the margins of an earlier Manhasset round. Bourita went through Ross's CV, and after citing the posting to Fes, dwelled on Ross' three tours in Algiers, implying suspicion about Ross' impartiality. Morocco sought clarification of his views of Van Walsum's ideas. PolCouns noted that when the USG lobbied in favor of Van Walsum, the one thing all agreed on was the need to preserve the process. He underscored Ross's reputation as one of the State Department's top diplomats in the region for a generation. His Algerian contacts might be an asset, given the problems Van Walsum had there. (Comment: Bourita subsequently got back to PolCouns with assurances that the GOM had no problem with Ross personally, but given problems with the process, wanted assurances on substance, including that he would get better support from the SYG than Van Walsum did. End comment.)

¶7. (C) Bourita allowed that his Minister's letter also demanded the ouster of Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Julian Harston, the head of the UN MINURSO mission responsible for Western Sahara. The letter cited multiple concerns and reports, including well-worn complaints about Harston's apology to the Polisario, when the Front protested vandalism by MINURSO military observers against some prehistoric glyphs in the desert between the berm and the Algerian border. Bourita added that the GOM had reports that Harston was trying to promote an expanded mandate for MINURSO to monitor human rights in the Western Sahara. PolCouns recalled that adding human rights to the mandate had not come up in the UNSC since before the current negotiations, but the international community did consider human rights important, in the territory, where there had been improvements, as well as in the Polisario-controlled camps.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) The GOM may have reason to be unhappy about the ouster of Van Walsum at what it sees as the Polisario's behest, and it may have felt some heat from press and Parliament about it. The Moroccans may see the UN's unwillingness to stand up for Van Walsum and his conclusions as partly due to personal politics within the Secretariat, including by the SRSG. GOM support for Van Walsum grew with the increasing criticism of him by the Polisario. They clearly want to institutionalize the statements of Van Walsum and the USG that independence is "unrealistic" as a position of the SYG and the Security Council. They may have overreacted with this recent letter, which could crimp the growing international sympathy for an autonomy-based political solution. They probably can be persuaded to accept Ross, but they may demand some assurances from the UN in return for their support. The Moroccan diplomatic accomplishments on Sahara have sometimes gotten bogged down over tactical issues. It will be important to keep them focused on preserving the Manhasset process and on how they might enhance interest of the other parties in the autonomy-based solution. End comment.

¶9. (U) Tripoli Minimize considered.

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Jackson